

Libby - press

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01/11/2008 09:44 AM

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Subject Montana's News Station: EPA holds asbestos clean up meeting in Libby

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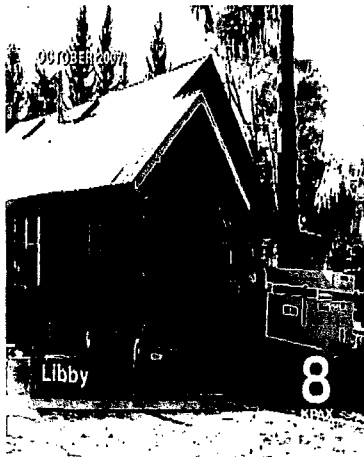
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EPA holds asbestos clean up meeting in Libby

Posted: Sep 20, 2007 05:25 PM MDT

Updated: Jan 11, 2008 07:41 AM MST



The focus of asbestos clean-up in Libby for the past four years has been on private homes and yards and now the question about what will be done about the source of the asbestos is being raised. Workers dug vermiculite for over 50 years at the W.R. Grace mine now officials need to come up with some solutions.

A public meeting was held in Libby on Thursday night as people went to hear about what the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is getting ready to do with the next phase of the asbestos clean up.

The EPA's Paul Peronard says removing all the left over material simply isn't an option, and in fact the EPA has brought more vermiculite to the mine. Over 45,000 cubic yards of contaminated soil has been dug up last year from residential properties.

Using that soil as cover material may be just one small part of what will be a larger solution. But before Peronard can decide how to approach the mine he needs to know how far the problem exists beyond it.

"How far out into the forest does the fallout go? How far can you measure that? You know, that's the sort of stuff to really figure out what you're going to do with the mine, you have to answer those questions first."

EPA officials heard from residents in Libby on Thursday night about the asbestos clean up priorities for this year, including research projects at the mine site and elsewhere around Libby.

We'll have more on that meeting during the 5:30 News on Montana's News Station.

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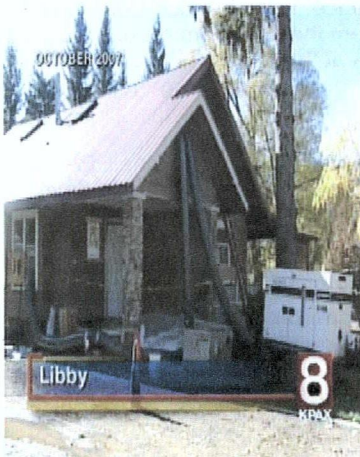
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(from January 10, 2008)

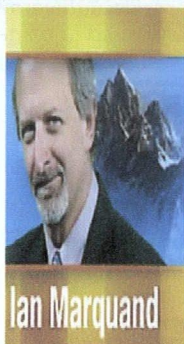


The residents of Libby and Troy will be able to tell officials with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency how to spend its asbestos cleanup budget for 2008 at a meeting set for Thursday.

While those who oversee the clean up say that they want to continue working on residential properties in both communities, they also want to start a vermiculite removal project along Flower Creek. The EPA also wants to test for asbestos in various indoor and outdoor locations.

But that's still not enough for some critics, including Montana Senator Max Baucus. He wants EPA officials to explain why it has not declared a public health emergency in Libby. Now he has documents that may hold the answer.

"I've read transcripts, I've read correspondence. It's very clear to me that there was a lot of political pressure to prevent the EPA from making the right decision a couple years ago. The EPA at that time was forced, I think, by the White House to say, 'No, don't declare an emergency.' And that's just wrong, wrong, wrong.">



Reporting from KPAX in Missoula

Senator Baucus had demanded the documents last year from the EPA and other federal agencies and says that a health emergency could have triggered a more complete clean-up of homes in Libby.

That action would have allowed asbestos to be removed from walls as well as from attics, ceilings and yards. A declaration also would provide more money to treat asbestos-related diseases in Libby.

Thursday's cleanup advisory meeting will start at 7:00 p.m. in the Little Theatre, which is located in the Libby school district building on Louisiana Street.

(from January 3, 2008)

This year may mark a shift in the emphasis in the cleanup of asbestos that's taking place in Libby. Next week officials with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency will hear from the people of Libby about what they want, and as they prepare for that meeting, officials are asking residents some provocative questions.

Those questions may bring some uncomfortable answers, which is nothing new between the EPA and the public after some eight years of community meetings. But now the EPA is asking for direction before it settles on a cleanup strategy for 2008.

Paul Peronard, who's the man in charge of the cleanup, wonders what kind of feedback he'll get.

"I can still find folks in Libby who don't think there's a problem up here, that it's way overblown."

Peronard made those comments 15 months ago, and today he has a new work plan for Libby. Now he wants local residents to speak up about it and is concerned that they may not.

"We thought this would have been a great opportunity to re-engage folks on things that impact them daily."

Next Thursday the EPA will ask for the public's opinions at a special community meeting and has also developed a comment form that's available online which asks residents about certain asbestos removal projects and about other work.

One of the topics is the evaluation of the W.R. Grace mine site and the continuing search for asbestos in and around Libby. It then asks whether or not those projects are worth doing.

Mike Crill has been a relentless critic of the EPA, even after he left Libby for Missoula. He's been trying to convince public officials that Libby never can be made safe, and in fact, should be quarantined.

"I'd rather see the town go under than to knowingly allow human beings to be exposed to something that's going to kill them."

Even more powerful critics of the EPA like Montana Senator Max Baucus say that's going too far.

"EPA's done a good job cleaning up. A lot of those sites have been cleaned up pretty well. So no, no, no. People should come to Libby."

Even if Libby folks say the research projects are a waste, Peronard says he's not ready to walk away from them.

"I think the work has to be done. But it does come at some sort of cost. And that is, money spent doing investigations is money not spent on cleanups."

Finally, Peronard wants to know whether or not Libby residents see any value in the public comment process itself, which is a question that may reveal even more about the community's state of mind.

"Half the folks who've come in and responded to us have just said, 'Look. Get about your business. And get this done. We don't want to think about it, it's hard. We're tired of thinking about it. We want it over.'"

EPA officials say that residents don't have to use the comment form, or limit themselves to the questions on it. For his part, Peronard says that no matter what comments people have, he wants to hear them.

(from January 2, 2008)

We first told you in November that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's cleanup of asbestos in and around Libby may shift gears in 2008 and next week the EPA will hear from local residents.

For the last five years the focus of the EPA's work in Libby has been removing vermiculite and Libby Asbestos from homes and yards. While that work will continue in 2008, leaders of the cleanup effort want input on some other projects as well.

Last year contractors removed vermiculite from 160 homes or properties, all in Libby, and this year the EPA wants to clean another 160, including six in nearby Troy that need immediate attention.

So far the EPA has examined over 500 places in Troy and found that 15 need removal work. They'll also look at another 500 properties this year.

The other priority for 2008 is Flower Creek which flows through Libby and has vermiculite in the rip-rap. The EPA wants to remove that rock and then restore the creek and its banks. Some lower priority projects include removing vermiculite-laced rock from Granite and Callahan Creeks as well as removing vermiculite at the local golf course.

The EPA is now asking residents which of those projects they think should go to the top of the list in 2008.

Also set for 2008 are some research projects as the EPA will continue to take air samples at homes on the cleanup list, including those that either have been cleaned or are still waiting for the work to be done.

The agency is also planning to perform follow-up sampling at Libby schools and will continue to monitor for asbestos along highway corridors and railroad tracks.

The research that began last year at the old W.R. Grace Mine last year will also continue in hopes of determining what kind of threat the land still poses.

The outline of the EPA's Work Plan for Libby is available online, as well as a comment form that residents can fill out. You can then e-mail it to the EPA's Denver office or bring it in person to the agency's Libby information center.

(from the archives)

Lawyers for W.R. Grace are challenging a federal appeals court ruling that restored criminal charges of "knowing endangerment" to the government's asbestos case against the company.

Last month a three judge panel of the Ninth Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals reversed or revised six decisions that had handed down by a federal judge in Missoula. Then a week later attorneys for W.R. Grace filed motions indicating the company would fight the panel's ruling.

Company attorneys have until November 5th to submit documents arguing the panel erred in its findings of fact.

An indictment handed down in 2005 charged W.R. Grace and seven of its former managers, one of whom died in February, with conspiring to conceal the health risks that were posed years ago by the company's now-closed Libby vermiculite mine.

Hundreds of people in Libby have fallen sick, some fatally, because of exposure to asbestos in the vermiculite.

(from September 28, 2007)

Last week prosecutors in the criminal case against W.R. Grace won a big victory at the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals when the court overturned four decisions made by trial judge Donald Molloy in Missoula.

One of the rulings involved the definition of asbestos that will be used in the trial. Here's a look at the definition of what asbestos is and why that is so critical to the Libby case.

Federal regulations only cover six kinds of asbestos and Libby asbestos is not one of them. Judge Molloy had ruled that only the six regulated forms would be allowed as evidence in the Grace trial but the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals said that decision was improper since it would exempt virtually all the asbestos found in Libby vermiculite.

Montana U.S. Attorney Bill Mercer says the decision is a legal victory for the government. But does it matter to scientists?

We asked a University of Montana researcher who's studying Libby asbestos and Andrij Holian with the UM Center for Environmental Health Sciences says the Libby fiber is not radically different from other asbestos fibers.

But while some asbestos is used to make products, Libby fibers were not and that's where federal regulations and definitions come into play.

"What's important here is asbestos fibers tend to be regulated because they're used for commercial purposes.